International cricket returns to Faisalabad with Pakistan-SA ODIs

FAISALABAD: International cricket is set to return to Faisalabad's Iqbal Stadium after 17 years as Pakistan take on South Africa in a three-match One-day International series starting Tuesday.

The central Punjab city last hosted an international fixture in 2008 when Pakistan faced Bangladesh. Following the 2009 militant attack on the Sri Lankan team bus in Lahore, Pakistan endured a six-year exile from home international cricket, playing their matches at neutral venues in the United Arab Emirates.

Match starts at 3:00pm (PST)

While other cities gradually returned to the international fold from 2015 onwards, Faisalabad remained off the map due to inadequate facilities — which have since been upgraded.

Pakistan's newly appointed ODI captain Shaheen Shah Afridi, who replaced Mohammad Rizwan after a string of poor results, expressed delight over Faisalabad's return as a host venue.

PAKISTAN opener Saim Ayub bats in the nets.—AFP

"It's a special occasion that Faisalabad is hosting an international match after 17 years; it will be good for the fans of the city," Shaheen told reporters on Monday. "It's an honour for me to lead Pakistan — the responsibility is big, but I will try to give my best."

Shaheen's comments came as he threw full support behind former captain Babar Azam, who rediscovered form during Pakistan's 2-1 T20I series win over the Proteas last week.

"Every cricketer struggles, but Babar must have realised in his last innings that he's back in form," Shaheen said. "He's been performing for Pakistan for the past four or five years and is our top T20 run-scorer. He has the ability to play big innings and inspire others to do the same."

Babar's composed knock in the decisive T20I on Saturday complemented Shaheen's fiery bowling as Pakistan sealed a four-wicket win in Lahore.

Shaheen, who previously captained the T20 side briefly last year before a 4-1 defeat in New Zealand ended his first stint, said he aimed to "lead from the front" in his new role.

"It's always been this way — when senior players perform, the team wins," he said. "I try to step up whether I'm captain or not."

The left-armer will lead a full-strength side featuring Haris Rauf, Naseem Shah, Fakhar Zaman, Babar and Rizwan. South Africa, meanwhile, will be without several first-choice players, including regular captain Temba Bavuma and fast bowlers Kagiso Rabada and Marco Jansen, who have been rested.

In Bavuma's absence, young opener Matthew Breetzke will lead the visitors.

"We are missing our core ODI group, but this gives the younger guys an opportunity to step up and take the challenge," he said.

Quinton de Kock, who reversed his 2023 ODI retirement, is also set to make a comeback.

The remaining ODIs will be played on Thursday and Saturday all at the same venue.—Agencies

PCB parts ways with women's team head coach Wasim

By Our Sports Reporter

LAHORE: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has not renewed the contract of national women's team head coach Mohammad Waseem following a string of disappointing performances, the board announced on Monday.

The decision comes after Pakistan failed to win a single match in the recently concluded ICC Women's World Cup where the national team played all of their matches in Sri Lanka.

Arch-rivals India, who were the co-hosts, won the eight-nation tournament after defeating South Africa by 52 runs on Sunday.

Waseem, a former Test cricketer, was appointed head coach in June last year. His tenure saw mixed results.

Under his guidance, the team reached the semi-finals of the T20 Asia Cup in Sri Lanka, where they lost to the hosts.

However, Pakistan then struggled in the ICC T20 World Cup in the UAE, losing three of their four group matches — to Australia, India and New Zealand — with their sole victory coming against Sri Lanka.

The team showed better form on home soil, winning all their matches in the ICC World Cup qualifier in Lahore to secure a place in the World Cup.

Subsequent tours were less successful. Pakistan lost a three-match T20 series 2-1 to Ireland and were also defeated 2-1 in a three-match One-day International series at home by South Africa ahead of the global showpiece.

"The Pakistan Cricket Board [PCB] has announced the completion of Mohammad Waseem's tenure as head coach of the Pakistan National Women's cricket team," the board said in a statement. "The process to appoint a new head coach is currently underway and the announcement regarding his successor will be made in due course."

SOUTH AFRICAN cricketers attend a net practice session at the Iqbal Stadium on Monday.—AFP

Alexander-Arnold's return with Real reminds Liverpool of what they are missing

LIVERPOOL: Trent Alexander-Arnold returns to Liverpool on Tuesday with both player and his boyhood club struggling to adapt after his emotional departure for Real Madrid.

Just metres from where the England international will enter Anfield, there still stands a giant mural of him decked in red alongside the quote: "I'm just a normal lad from Liverpool whose dream has just come true."

Alexander-Arnold's journey from supporter to two-time Premier League winner and Champions League glory was a fairytale.

But for much of the Liverpool support, his exit after running down his contract, meaning the Premier League champions received only a nominal fee, soured his legacy.

Alexander-Arnold was even booed at times in the final few months of his Liverpool career, despite his contribution to the club's only two league titles since 1990.

On finally announcing his departure in May, the defender, now 27, said it was "easily the hardest decision I've ever made in my life".

A frosty reception is almost guaranteed on Tuesday should he feature for the first time as a visiting player at his former home.

Alexander-Arnold said he had "mixed emotions" over his return and that he would not celebrate if he scored.

The defender said it was up to the fans how they react, adding that he will "always love the club".

"No matter what, my feelings won't change towards Liverpool," he told Amazon Prime. "I've got memories there that will last me a lifetime and, no matter how I'm received, that won't change."

The heightened emotions around the exit of the player Liverpool fans used to serenade as the "Scouser in our team" took the focus away from how much of a loss Alexander-Arnold would be on the field.

He was just one cog in a major summer overhaul of Arne Slot's squad, but is arguably the most missed of the band of players to leave in the transfer window.

Slot has regularly been forced to drop his best-performing midfielder this season, Dominik Szoboszlai, back to right-back as neither Conor Bradley nor Jeremie Frimpong have been able to fill the void left by Alexander-Arnold.

Although much criticised for his one-on-one defending, Alexander-Arnold was so sought after because of what he brought going forward.

He departed as the defender with the most assists in Premier League history thanks both to his exquisite range of passing and precise set-piece delivery.

Mohamed Salah in particular has struggled to adjust without the service of his partner down the Liverpool right for the past eight seasons.

A run of six defeats in eight games has highlighted just how much Alexander-Arnold is being missed, but despite having struggling to adapt to life at Real and having not featured since a hamstring injury in September, he said no one at Real would underestimate the Premier League champions.

"It will be a very difficult game, the reception and atmosphere will contribute to that, but more so the football for me," he said. "Although they haven't had the results of late, they're still a top footballing team, and nobody here thinks it's going to be an easy game."

Liverpool comfortably defeated Real in the group stage of last season's Champions League but their win over Aston Villa on Saturday was ther first in the Premier League for more than a month.

Xabi Alonso 's Real, meanwhile, are on a high, transformed from last season and improving weekly under the manager having won 13 of their 14 matches so far.

The lie fifth in the 36-team Champions League table, five places above Liverpool going into Tuesday's clash.

PSG TAKE ON BAYERN JUGGERNAUT

Tuesday's second blockbuster is a top-of-the-table clash between reigning champions Paris St Germain and second-placed Bayern Munich.

PSG midfielder Vitinha said on Monday that the home clash with undefeated Bayern will be a meeting between "the two best teams in Europe".

PSG come into the sternest test yet of their European title defence top of Ligue 1 and with three wins from three so far in the Champions League league phase.

But Bayern, have started their season with a European record 15 wins in 15 outings, and sit second behind only PSG in the standings in the continent's elite club competition.

But as for who is mightiest between the two heavyweights, Vitinha said Tuesday's match will tell.

"The answer will be given tomorrow. We have to talk on the pitch," he told reporters at the pre-match press conference. "When you're a player, you want to play in this type of match because everyone wants to see it, and people will say, 'this team is better because they won'."

PSG, Bayern and Real are among five teams with three straight wins so far, the others being Arsenal and Inter Milan.

Among other action elsewhere on Tuesday, Luciano Spalletti begins his Champions League salvage operation with Juventus as the Italians host 11th-placed Sporting Lisbon in search of a first win in Europe this season.

Former Italy coach Spalletti got off to a winning start with his new team on Saturday with a 2-1 Serie A success at Cremonese and has a near blank slate to work with as Juve have just two points from their first three Champions League matches and sit 25th, inside the elimination zone.

Tuesday's fixtures (all times GMT): Slavia Prague v Arsenal (1745), Napoli v Eintracht Frankfurt (1745) Atletico de Madrid v Union St-Gilloise (2000), Bodo/ Glimt v Monaco (2000), Juventus v Sporting CP (2000), Liverpool v Real Madrid (2000), Olympiakos Piraeus v PSV (2000), Paris St Germain v Bayern Munich (2000), Tottenham Hotspur v FC Copenhagen (2000).—Agencies

KIRKBY: Liverpool's Hugo Ekitike (L) and team-mate Alexis Mac Allister attend a training session on Monday.—AFP

AFC president Sheikh Salman set to visit Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: Asian Football Confederation president Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, a member of Bahrain's royal family, will arrive in Pakistan on Tuesday for an official four-day visit.

Sheikh Salman, who is also FIFA's senior vice-president, has been declared State Guest during his visit, as per the directions of the Prime Minister, and will be accompanied by senior officials from Asia's football governing body.

He is scheduled to hold meetings with the civil and military leadership "with focus on infrastructure development in the field of football, enhancing youth participation in sports, and exploring avenues of cooperation on sports development projects in Pakistan", according to the Ministry of Inter-provincial Coordination.

"We are confident that this historic visit will lay the foundation for a new era of football development in Pakistan," IPC minister Rana Sanaullah Khan was quoted as saying in a statement. "It will not only promote sports but also strengthen sports diplomacy, youth empowerment, and regional cooperation between Pakistan, Bahrain, and other Asian nations."

Sheikh Salman, who was elected AFC president in 2013, last made an official visit to the country during the 2014 SAFF Women's Championship.—Sports Reporter

Trott to leave as Afghanistan coach after World Cup

KABUL: Afghanistan coach Jonathan Trott will leave the position after next year's T20 World Cup, the country's cricket board (ACB) said on Monday.

Former England international Trott, who was appointed in July 2022, led Afghanistan to the semi-finals of last year's T20 World Cup, a year after they narrowly missed out on a top-four finish in the league stage of the One-day International World Cup.

"The tenure of head coach Jonathan Trott will officially conclude following the ICC T20 World Cup 2026, set to take place in February," the ACB said in a statement.

"This decision comes as part of ACBs long term strategic planning for the next phase of the national teams growth."

Afghanistan stunned defending champions England, Pakistan and Sri Lanka at the 2023 ODI World Cup, picking up four wins in the tournament. They fell two points short of a place in the semis.

Wins over Australia and Bangladesh helped Afghanistan reach their maiden World Cup semi-final in the 20-over format in 2024, before losing to South Africa.

"I am proud of what we have accomplished together, and I will always remain a supporter of Afghan cricket. I wish the team and the Afghan people continued success in the years ahead," Trott said in a statement.

Next year's T20 World Cup will take place in India and Sri Lanka, with the final set for March 8.—Reuters

Ex-PWF chief questions PSB ban on weightlifters, officials

By Mohammad Yaqoob

LAHORE: Former president of the Pakistan Weightlifting Federation (PWF) Hafiz Imran Butt has expressed surprise over the Pakistan Sports Board's (PSB) decision to ban four national weightlifters and three officials for four years for alleged doping violations.

The PSB, in a statement issued on Monday, said the bans were imposed following "conclusive anti-doping violations" established by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the International Testing Agency (ITA) under Operation Jasmine.

However, Imran said all four weightlifters — Sharjeel Butt, Abdul Rehman, Ghulam Mustafa and Farhan Majeed — along with their coach Waqas Akbar, were already serving four-year bans imposed by the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) in 2022, which will conclude in March next year.

"I cannot understand the PSB's decision," Imran told *Dawn* on Monday. "Our four weightlifters were banned because of a misunderstanding during WADA's surprise visit to the national training camp at Railways Stadium, Lahore, in 2021.

"Dr Waqar Ahmad, the camp's medical official, did not allow the WADA team to collect samples, doubting their authenticity. The athletes did not refuse testing — they only followed the doctor's instructions. Still, the IWF imposed a four-year ban, which will end in March 2026."

The former PWF chief said the PSB's latest decision was taken "without conducting any inquiry" or summoning the athletes or officials concerned.

The PSB's statement also announced four-year bans on Imran and his son, Irfan Butt, who serves as a PWF coach — though neither had been sanctioned by the IWF.

"After March 2026, our weightlifters will again be eligible to participate in international competitions," Imran said.

According to the PSB press release, the banned individuals — including Imran, Irfan and coach Waqas Akbar — are prohibited from all sports-related activities for four years, effective immediately.

"The decision follows a sequence of events beginning in 2021, when several athletes evaded testing and later tested positive," the PSB said, adding that multiple suspensions had been confirmed by the Court of Arbitration for Sport's Anti-Doping Division (CAS ADD) earlier this year.

The PSB reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to "clean competition and zero tolerance for doping," noting that all banned athletes and officials would remain ineligible to hold office, access PSB facilities or participate in any sports activity until their suspension period ends.

India's women cricketers hail new era but challenges remain

NEW DELHI: India's historic Women's World Cup victory has sparked an excitement which it is hoped will inspire the next generation and draw new fans to the sport.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, expected to meet the winners on Wednesday, believes the "historic win will motivate future champions to take up sports".

Hosts India defeated South Africa by 52 runs on Sunday, claiming their first-ever Women's World Cup.

At the top level, gender parity has long been championed by former Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) secretary Jay Shah, who introduced equal match fees for men and women.

The 50-over World Cup also boasted a record $13.88 million prize purse, eclipsing the men's total from two years ago.

Shah, now International Cricket Council (ICC) chairman, hailed the win, citing the BCCI's "increased investment, pay parity with male cricketers (and), overhaul of the coaching staff".

Former India skipper Mithali Raj described it as the culmination of years of effort.

"For every person standing behind a young girl who dares to dream of wearing India's colours, this is a pivotal moment, a reminder that dreams do come true," she wrote, posting a photograph of herself embracing the trophy.

Despite the triumph, women's sports in India still have far to go and the impact of the World Cup win may be gradual.

"The gender gap is stark, especially during adolescence and early adulthood," according to a 2024 State of Sports and Physical Activity report, backed by global consultancy firm Dalberg.

"The largest gender gaps unsurprisingly occur when caregiving responsibilities increase," it adds, citing household chores and care of children or the elderly.

The UN children's agency, in partnership with the ICC, sought to use the World Cup to "create equal opportunities for every girl and boy", Unicef representative to India Cynthia McCaffrey said.

"As a cricketer, I know how the sport is a great equaliser," India's vice-captain Smriti Mandhana said, who joined the Unicef campaign.

Women now make up more than a third of India's estimated 655 million sports fans.

A 2024 Deloitte and Google study found women — 236 million fans, or 36 percent — are shaping the sports market, debunking the notion of a male-only fanbase.

India's Women's Premier League (WPL), staged first in 2023, delivered the BCCI roughly $700 million in franchise and media rights alone.

Young women cricketers say the World Cup success will strengthen their sport.

At a net session in a New Delhi academy, a bouncer slammed into Armeet Kaur's helmet, prompting a flurry of concerned apologies.

The 20-year-old brushed them off and told the bowler to carry on. The next ball, she stepped out of her crease and lofted it clean.

"Girls are not fragile," she said. "And the good thing is that people know that now — after seeing women's cricket on TV. That matters because what people think does have a bearing on the world." Kaur credited systemic changes in women's cricket for India's success.

"Now the money is almost at par with men's cricket, and there are more tournaments for women at all levels," she said.

"The good thing is that people no longer discourage girls from playing."

The World Cup drew record viewers: the first 13 matches attracted more than 60 million viewers, five times the 2022 edition.

While modest for the world's most populous nation, it signals growing interest in women's cricket.

That means Indian girls can see cricket as a viable career.

"I started playing because it was my passion," said Ishita Singh. "But now I want it to be my full-time profession."—AFP

World Cup winners get $5.75m reward

NEW DELHI: India's cricket board on Monday announced a cash reward of $5.75 million for the women's team after their triumphant World Cup campaign.

Hosts India beat South Africa by 52 runs in front of a sell-out home crowd at Mumbai's DY Patil Stadium on Sunday to lift their first One-day International World Cup.

Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) secretary Devajit Saikia told AFP that the money was awarded "as a token of appreciation for the women's team", and would be spread across the players, support staff and selectors involved. The Indian women, who triumphed at the third attempt after finishing runners-up in 2005 and 2017, have already received $4.48 million in prize money from the International Cricket Council (ICC) — a 239 percent increase from the $1.32 million awarded to Australia in 2022.

This edition of the Women's World Cup boasted an overall purse of $13.88 million, eclipsing the total $10 million for the last edition of the men's championship.—AFP